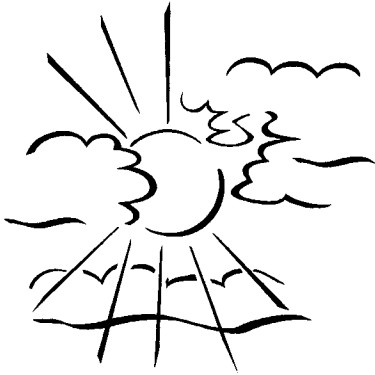


***Department
of
Human
Services***

**Prepared by the
DHS Office of
Communications
(517) 373-7394**



***Important story at this spot**

Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

TOPIC	PAGE
*Health Care	2-13
Child Abuse/Neglect/Protection	14-25
Juvenile Justice	26-29
Vulnerable Adults	30
Child Support	31
Energy Assistance	32-37
Domestic Violence	38-39
Unintended Pregnancies	40
Homelessness	41-43
Living Wage	44

October 24, 2005

GRANHOLM WANTS NATIONAL HEALTH PLAN

Some form of a national health care plan, perhaps beginning with assuming the burden for catastrophic level costs, is needed to help manufacturers and other businesses stay competitive with overseas firms, Governor Jennifer Granholm said Monday.

The governor said a health plan could be a “uniquely American” approach. “Even if we have to proceed in incremental way, we can stem the losses of jobs,” Ms. Granholm said. “The crisis is upon us. It is now very clear that it is not a moral issue; it is a competitive issue.”

She made her comments as she discussed a letter sent Friday and made public over the weekend asking the state’s Congressional delegation to lead action at the federal level to help manufacturers.

Ms. Granholm said auto manufacturers and the UAW (with negotiated cuts in health care) have done their part and the state will have done its part with approval of a business tax restructuring package and a \$1 billion high tech jobs plan, and it is now time for the federal government to do its part.

Her action came a day after a proposed national auto manufacturing summit was floated last week by New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who said it should look at health care and pension costs, fuel efficiency and foreign competition.

Republicans faulted Ms. Granholm for merely following that path.

Granholm's letter asked Michigan's congressional delegation to support a bipartisan, cooperative effort "to urge the White House to take action — both through its executive powers and its ability to work closely with Congress — to swiftly enact policies that will positively impact the nation's manufacturing sector."

In her letter, Ms. Granholm mentioned the catastrophic insurance pool as one of several things the federal government could tackle. She also listed doubling federal spending on preventative health care, investing in health information technology as a way to reduce the cost of providing health care, helping private businesses meet pension commitments, and stronger enforcement of trade laws especially regarding currency manipulation and protection of patents and other intellectual property.

“I believe our united action will also stimulate the governors and congressional delegations of other industrial states to call for needed federal actions,” Ms. Granholm said in her letter seeking bipartisan cooperation.

But one GOP member of the delegation said the governor was engaging in finger-pointing and bashing companies that create jobs.

U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Brighton) said other states are gaining auto manufacturing plants at Michigan’s expense and asserted the governor has opposed every action taken by federal officials to help grow the domestic job market. He said the requested action by Ms. Granholm wastes time instead of getting Michigan’s economy moving.

“Tax cuts are stimulating the economy nationwide and helping create jobs in every state except Michigan; health savings accounts allow hundreds of thousands of workers to have health care for the first time while saving millions of dollars; and the end of frivolous lawsuits saves our economy billions of dollars and tens of thousands of jobs,” Mr. Rogers said.

And state Republican Party spokesperson Nate Bailey said the fact that the governor followed Ms. Clinton’s call for a summit indicates that “this is the leadership deficit that plagues this state. We don’t have a governor who understands what needs to be done to turn things around.”

Anticipating some of the criticism, Ms. Granholm said Ontario’s success – not that of other states – in surpassing Michigan as the largest source of auto manufacturing shows it is not taxes or bureaucracy driving business decisions. She said the advantage the northern neighbor holds is a national health care system that relieves auto manufacturers of a cost that represents about \$1,500 of every car General Motors makes domestically.

“We are not afraid of trade, but it is not fair to ask major industries, major manufacturers that provide health care, whereas there are companies inside those countries are not forced to pay for health care or pensions and where they are erecting trade barriers to our products,” Ms. Granholm told reporters.

Published October 25, 2005

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Wal-Mart cuts costs of workers' health care Retailer: New health plan is not a response to critics

By Marcus Kabel
Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, MO. - Wal-Mart Stores Inc. announced more affordable health care for some of its workers Monday in the latest shot in a battle with critics for the hearts of consumers. The move by the world's largest retailer comes as the crucial holiday sales season approaches.

Analysts say Wal-Mart needs to add about \$250 million a day in sales during the holiday season to meet earnings targets and cannot afford to lose ground to an increasingly united front of opponents who want consumers to shun the discounter until it changes its ways.

"Consumers increasingly have a conscience and are increasingly shifting to competitors," said Burt Flickinger, managing director of Strategic Marketing.

Advertisement

"It is critical for Wal-Mart to start doing a billion dollars a day in sales starting on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, which is the big 30-day push for Christmas and year-end sales," Flickinger said. He said daily sales are about \$750 million.

Pressure has mounted as groups from unions to the Sierra Club to the National Organization of Women have linked up, creating two new campaign organizations this year, Wake-Up Wal-Mart and Wal-Mart Watch.

Wal-Mart says it is not responding to critics but rather to demands from its employees by launching a plan to lower health insurance premiums, allowing some to buy coverage for as little as \$11 per month.

Wal-Mart spokesman Dan Fogleman would not say how much the plan would cost the Bentonville, Ark.-based company, which has 1.2 million domestic employees. The plan is to go into effect in 2006.

The move comes as Wal-Mart has been under increasing criticism for not offering health coverage to enough workers and for its high costs to employees for the insurance. Fewer than half of Wal-Mart's employees are covered, compared to 80 percent at rival Costco Wholesale Corp.

Wal-Mart's health plan

- A new health care plan proposed by Wal-Mart would have monthly payments for most workers of \$25 for individuals, \$37 for single parents, and \$65 for families.
- The plan would have a \$1,000 deductible but would allow three doctor visits before the deductible had to be paid.

Experts: Health-care costs too much in America

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

By Cedric Ricks

cricks@kalamazoo Gazette.com 388-8557

Scott Weber is a new Kalamazoo County employee -- a Head Start nutritionist who started less than a month ago.

He has a 90-day waiting period before his county-paid health insurance kicks in. Until then, he must rely on health insurance through a former employer who laid him off.

Weber's wife is pregnant, and to continue his former health-insurance policy would cost him more than \$1,000 a month, or about half his salary. He is still trying to figure out how he will make those payments. But the health insurance is crucial for his family.

Weber put a face on the growing number of people who don't have health insurance during a two-hour town-hall meeting Monday night in the chambers of the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners.

The meeting was one of several that the Michigan Department of Community Health is holding in cities around the state to get public ideas on health care.

Local agencies that also sponsored the talk included the Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services Department, the Kalamazoo County Human Services Department, Borgess Health Alliance, the Family Health Center, Healthy Futures and Bronson Healthcare Group.

About 40 people, many of them connected with health-care, human-services or nonprofit organizations that deal with uninsured people, attended the meeting.

They tended to raise more concerns than solutions.

"I think this lack of health-care coverage is a symptom of our society living an extremely unhealthy lifestyle," Weber said. "As much as people don't want to talk about it, we have to get back to the way people live in this country."

"People who have lived under high stress, poor nutrition, not taking care of their bodies -- that's why our health-care-system costs are spiraling out of control," he said.

Dale Hein, director of the Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services Department, said more than 27,000 people in Kalamazoo County don't have health insurance.

That includes about 3,000 children and 29 percent of county residents between the ages of 18 and 24 and 23 percent of residents who are between the ages of 25 and 34, Hein said.

"These figures all exceed the state and national average," Hein said.

He said the medical bills of people who don't have insurance are a leading cause of personal bankruptcies among Americans.

Moses Walker, executive director for community relations and chief diversity officer at Borgess Health Alliance, said the state of Michigan can't offer solutions to providing health care.

"The state is broke," Walker said. "There is not going to be a state solution. If there is going to be a solution, it's going to have to be a national solution."

"Do we believe that everyone should have the right to basic health-care coverage?" Walker asked.

Americans spend \$5,267 per capita on health care every year, almost two-and-a-half times the industrialized world's median of \$2,193 and more than any other nation, according to a cited study by the National Coalition on Health Care.

Much of that is spent on people in the last stages of their lives, said Walker, who argued that more should be done to provide basic health care for young people.

But Anthony King, president and chief executive officer of the Family Health Center, posed a bigger question.

“What does basic coverage mean?” King asked. “That's going to be one of the big challenges and some of the big questions that are going to have to be asked.”

King said basic coverage might include more incentives to provide preventive and primary care. He said too much emphasis is placed on producing the latest and greatest drug.

“We have so many things that are preventable if we could have residents eat well, exercise and avoid risky behavior,” King said.

Posted: 10-25-2005

Medicare Drug program explained

About 300 turn out for forum on program

By KEVIN BRACISZESKI

Ludington Daily News Staff Writer

About 300 Mason County senior citizens crowded into the Ludington City Hall community room Monday. They wanted to learn about the federal government's new Medicare D drug coverage program, which begins Jan. 1, 2006.

Seniors filled all the available chairs and even stood along the room's walls and out into the hallway to hear about the complicated program. Several stayed after the meeting to ask questions after the allotted time expired.

Monday's meeting was hosted by U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Holland, who brought Peter Leonis, of the Region V Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services, to explain the program and answer questions.

Local interest, as well as interest throughout the United States, is high after the federal government announced recently that Medicare will begin subsidizing insurance coverage to help people pay for prescription drugs.

Leonis said the program does not cover Canadian drugs, and that once it's in place, a further act of Congress would be needed to change the law.

The program for the government to pay money to selected American insurance companies on behalf of an estimated 42 million people. Hoekstra estimated the program will cost the government about \$450-\$700 billion in the next 10 years.

Eligible people who want the coverage must choose a plan and enroll between Nov. 15 and May 15, 2006. If they sign on after that date they will pay a higher premium. They must also sign on before 2005 ends for their coverage to start Jan. 1. People who sign up between Jan. 1 and May 15, 2006 will start their coverage late, but will not be charged a penalty.

The penalty for joining the program late is an increase in monthly premiums that is based on 1 percent of the premium times the number of months the person waited to sign up for the program. For example, someone waiting three years to sign up would pay a penalty of 36 percent of the premium each month.

One exception, Leonis said, is if someone has prescription coverage better than the Medicare plan, they can keep that coverage rather than signing on for the Medicare plan. He said companies providing coverage better than the Medicare plan will soon send letters to their clients.

Keep those letters safe, said Donna Baade, director of the Ludington Senior Center. If that coverage is reduced in the future, Baade said, those who have the original letter as proof can join the Medicare program without paying a penalty.

One example of better coverage is Veterans Administration benefits, Leonis said.

The monthly premiums for participating in the program will range from \$13.75 to \$65, depending on the insurance plan each senior chooses, Leonis said.

The program carries an annual deductible of \$250, which people must pay out of their pockets before the Medicare plan begins payments. Participants will then pay 25 percent of the next \$2,000 in prescription costs, with Medicare picking up the remaining 75 percent.

When a participant has received a total of \$2,250 in prescription drugs, he will have paid \$750 of that cost, in addition to the monthly premiums he pays to the insurance

company.

The participant then pays the next \$2,850 in drug costs out of his pocket, in addition to the premiums, before the program starts paying again. At that point the program begins paying 95 percent of the costs for drugs more than \$5,100 during a year, and the participant pays the remaining 5 percent.

Join the plan by phone by calling Medicare at (800) 633-4227, or applying online at www.medicare.gov. Leonis said prospective enrollees should have the following information available: their current health care coverage information, the names of drugs they are currently taking, the drug dosage and the monthly payments.

Those eligible for Medicare have either recently received Medicare handbooks explaining the program, or they should expect to receive those handbooks soon, Leonis said.

Hoekstra said the handbooks include information about the insurance companies participating in the program. He said he doesn't expect people to contact every company on the list, anymore than he would expect that they would call every insurance company in their phone books when considering the purchase of car insurance.

He used the car insurance analogy again later in the meeting, saying people can't sign up for car insurance after an accident and expect the company to pay for the damage. However, he added, someone who signs on for an inexpensive Medicare prescription drug policy early can later change their mind to pick up a more expensive, more comprehensive policy later if their needs grow.

Leonis said people can change policies each year with no penalty.

Among the other key points Leonis discussed Monday were:

- the only eligibility requirement is that program participants must be eligible for Medicare.
- there are no income requirements, but seniors with low incomes may be eligible for reduced-rate coverage through the Social Security Administration.

To qualify for that help a person's income, including Social Security benefits, must be below \$14,355 a year, or \$19,245 if married. Assets —not including houses, cars and personal possessions — must also be below \$11,500, or \$23,000 if married.

- people should consider cost, coverage and convenience when choosing a plan.

Considerations Leonis mentioned included does the plan include the drugs a person is currently taking? He said if a specific prescription is not included by the plan, a person can appeal if their doctor states that the specific drug, and not a substitute, is needed.

- Those who spend considerable time living outside Michigan, such as snowbirds, should consider choosing a plan with a nationwide insurance network.

To get more information about the Medicare prescription drug plan, call Medicare at (800) 633-4227, or go online at www.medicare.gov.

Local senior centers also can provide help. Mason County's centers are in Ludington, Scottville and Tallman Lake. Pentwater and Manistee also have senior center.

Paula Price, assistant director of the Ludington Senior Center, recently received training to help people understand the new law.

kevinb@ludingtondailynews.com

843-1122, ext. 346

NEWS IN A MINUTE: Seminar today is on programs that help pay for drugs

October 25, 2005

PRESCRIPTIONS

If you're one of the 704,000 Michigan residents who have trouble paying for prescription drugs, you're invited to the Southfield Public Library today from 3 to 4 p.m. to get help.

A drug industry group called the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America has set up a program to help people find government- and industry-sponsored programs that might help them pay for their medications.

The program, called the Partnership for Prescription Assistance, is taking a bus around the country to get the word out that help is available and free.

If you can't make it to the library, you can call 888-477-2669 from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. or visit www.pparxmi.org.

Since it started in April, the partnership has helped almost 30,000 Michiganders, according to Arlene Gorelick of the Epilepsy Foundation of Michigan, which supports the partnership.

By Emilia Askari

MEDICARE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: Long-term care requires specific provider

October 25, 2005

This is part of a continuing Free Press series answering readers' questions and concerns about the new Medicare Prescription Drug program. The Free Press will publish answers weekdays through Nov. 15, the first day to sign up for the program.

Marine City resident Jim Webb has power of attorney for his father, James Webb Sr., 78, who lives in a nursing home in Ohio. His father's medication comes from the pharmacy his nursing home uses, the Institutional Care Pharmacy (ICP).

QUESTION: How can I make the best decision for my father? Is it true that it may be best to choose any plan just to get signed up and change plans later?

ANSWER: As a long-term care resident, your father needs to select a plan that has the LTC Pharmacy in its network.

To find out which plans have that option, call 800-633-4227, visit the prescription drug plan finder at www.medicare.gov or call the Ohio Senior Health Insurance Information Program at 800-686-1578 or 614-644-3458.

Because your father lives in a nursing home, you can change his plan monthly. If he has not applied for extra financial help, you should do that for him.

He may qualify for assistance with the cost of the premiums, drugs and deductibles.

The answer to today's question comes from experts on the new law at the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the federal agency that administers Medicare and Medicaid, and the Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program (MMAP).

MMAP volunteer counselors are available at 800-803-7174 and can provide information about upcoming events where experts will answer questions.

To compare plans online, seniors or a helper can go to www.medicare.gov or call 800-633-4227.

Submit questions to the Free Press at askabout_medicare@freepress.com or 313-222-1824.

To see answers to questions already published go to www.freep.com/news/health.

By Ruby L. Bailey, Free Press
Washington staff

LOCAL COMMENT: Don't ignore nursing home closings

October 25, 2005

BY RICHARD L. DOUGLASS
Detroit Free Press

The grass is wild and trash is piled up by the front door of this once respectable and bustling place. A front window has been broken, and weeds are growing tall in sidewalk cracks.

The parking lot is empty and the security gate is open wide, one hinge broken off. There are official looking signs nailed to the front doors.

This is not a factory, nor is it an abandoned apartment building. It is a closed nursing home in northwest Detroit.

Farther west on Seven Mile is another. Over on the Boulevard there are more.

These are silent sentinels of a looming crisis in Detroit that will directly affect thousands of our most vulnerable citizens.

Nobody seems to notice.

While few of us were paying attention, Detroit has been losing nursing homes at a persistent pace that is now quickening. Since most of them were built in the 1960s and early 1970s to take advantage of the new Medicaid program, these places have been through lots of tough times.

At first they took in frail and elderly mental patients from the state hospitals in a messy saga we call deinstitutionalization. The nursing homes got a bad reputation from that process and started catering to people who needed a place to put an aging mom or dad.

Nursing homes became alternatives to home care of the elderly for middle-class families that were then able to become two-income households. Most of these nursing homes were for-profit businesses because there was no public money to expand the hospital-based health care system for the frail elderly. As for-profit facilities, they received no government grants, or gifts from churches or grateful family members. The not-for-profit facilities, supported by church denominations or fraternal orders, are a kind of elite class in the nursing home system and only represent about 30% of it.

The crisis is with the for-profits. The poorest, most frail and most isolated people in our community are being cared for in facilities that are also poor, too expensive to maintain with Medicaid income and

isolated from mainstream health care institutions. The combination of the most vulnerable people being cared-for in the most vulnerable facilities defines the problem.

Michigan's Medicaid Program, just like all other Medicaid programs in every state, pays nursing homes to care for people because they are poor, not because they are old.

Medicare covers health care for the elderly; the Medicaid criterion is poverty plus an inability to care for one's self.

Medicare should probably have embraced long-term care from its inception in 1965. It didn't happen because nursing homes were scarce then, and the geniuses in Washington just didn't think about it.

Michigan has since closed most of the mental hospitals, sending the patients into the community where medications were supposed to do the work. But, who wants to be in a group home and overmedicated? In the course of time these people became homeless, injured or hospitalized. And because they were poor and couldn't take care of themselves, guess where the state placed them? You are right. In the same nursing homes where elderly, frail patients were.

And now, with the addition of poor and isolated people with late-stage AIDS, MS and other disabling diseases, the frail elderly are sharing space with younger people who are mentally ill and some who are sexually active, and a mixture of patients that boggles the mind.

In Detroit, nursing homes are closing, not because the owners and staff don't want to do the work, but because the work cannot be done without unpaid heroics by the nursing staff.

Clearly the state is unconcerned, as are most civic leaders, because these folks really don't represent much of a political constituency. But we all should care because these patients and residents are the least among us; these are the most vulnerable people.

Of course, if you remember that these places are often the only major source of jobs in a community, then maybe you do pay attention. But if you lost your job because a nursing home closed, then you are probably poor, too, and civic leadership probably won't care.

I wonder who will take care of these unwanted people if more nursing homes close.

I wonder if anybody will pay attention.

RICHARD L. DOUGLASS is a professor of health administration at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. In 2004 he conducted a research project for the Detroit Area Agency on Aging on the status of Medicaid-dependent nursing homes in Detroit. Write to him at richard.douglass@emich.edu or in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 600 W. Fort St., Detroit, MI 48226. The complete report and a synopsis are online at www.daaa1a.org/daaa.

Oct. 24, 2005

EVENT ANNOUNCEMENT

State Human Services official to address child welfare at Fauri Lecture

DATE: 3 p.m. Nov. 1, 2005

EVENT: Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, will deliver the 2005 Fedele F. and Iris M. Fauri Memorial Lecture in Child Welfare, "Child welfare in Michigan: What do we know, where do we go? A public health perspective on child welfare." The event is free and open to the public.

Michigan Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm appointed Udow director of the Family Independence Agency, now the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS). The agency directs the operations of public assistance and service programs through a network of local offices. DHS programs include temporary cash assistance, food assistance, child care, child support enforcement, medical assistance, adoption and foster care services, domestic violence services, juvenile justice services and adult and children's protective services.

Udow has a master's degree in health services administration from the U-M School of Public Health. In 1994, the school honored her with the John H. Romani Outstanding Alumni Award. The Fedele F. and Iris M. Fauri Memorial Lecture in Child Welfare is presented annually in recognition of the former U-M vice president for state relations and dean of social work and his wife. His leadership and accomplishments in child welfare spanned nearly 50 years. Much of the current social welfare legislation at both the state and federal levels is the product of his activities, first as director of the Michigan Department of Social Services, and then through his years in Washington, D.C., where he held numerous leadership positions.

PLACE: Educational Conference Center (Room 1840), School of Social Work Building, 1080 South University Ave. [Central Campus map](#)

SPONSOR: School of Social Work.

EVENT CONTACT: Terri Torkko, (734) 763-9534.

News Service Contact: [Jared Wadley](#)

Phone: (734) 647-4418

October 23, 2005

Charges may be lodged against 3

By SHERI MCWHIRTER

Record-Eagle staff writer

GAYLORD - Otsego County Prosecutor Kyle Legel expects to file charges against inmates who allegedly sexually assaulted a 14-year-old boy in the county jail while he was held there as an adult.

Legel said an investigation indicated the alleged Sept. 22 incident did not include sexual penetration. However, indecent exposure and/or criminal sexual assault charges are expected, he said.

Legel expects to receive a police report on Monday.

"I do anticipate some charges coming out of this," Legel said.

Sheriff Jim McBride said the police report was finalized Friday after interviews with the alleged victim, suspects and their lawyers. McBride said the report recommends charges against the three accused inmates.

The boy's mother is Gaylord resident Kristeen Marcinkowski. She accused jail employees of failing to protect her son and contends the police report was delayed as retribution against her family because of media attention surrounding the alleged assault.

"I don't think anything will come of this, I really don't. I don't think they care," she said.

Marcinkowski's son has 18 charges in his juvenile criminal record, mostly for breaking and entering. He was ordered into adult court by 46th Circuit Judge Michael Cooper on the most recent charges of breaking and entering and home invasion.

McBride said the investigation took time to complete and was not a priority case because the suspects were not on the street. He also said the teen "was more danger to the public than he ever was in here."

Marcinkowski said her son was in a cell with five other inmates, who all "roughed him up" and put his head in the toilet. She said three of the inmates exposed themselves, and one rubbed his genitals on her son's face.

Marcinkowski said she intends to sue Otsego County for failing to protect her son, she said. The boy is now in a cell with two other adult inmates.

Police looking for suspect in criminal sexual conduct case

By Tanya Berkebile, Cadillac News

CADILLAC - The Cadillac Police Department is investigating an alleged fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct (unwanted touching) incident that occurred Monday morning to a 15-year-old Cadillac High School student.

The student said while she was walking to school between 8:30 and 8:45 a.m. on North Mitchell Street, south of Boon Road, she was approached by a man who was driving in a small red two-door car. When he asked her if she wanted a ride, she accepted.

According to the report, the man began asking her questions that made her uncomfortable and instead of driving her to the school, he stopped in a city park off Chestnut Street.

While at the park, the suspect touched her inappropriately and tried to grab her as she got out of the car. The victim then ran from the park and the suspect drove away in the opposite direction.

The suspect is described as a white male in his 30s, with shaggy brown hair, bad teeth and a couple days' growth of beard. The make and model of the small red two-door car is unknown.

The police department is continuing the investigation in an attempt to identify the suspect and encourages all parents to tell their children not to accept a ride with anyone they do not know.

"Although parents do need to talk to their kids about this, they need to find a balance," said Jeff Hawke, director of public safety at the Cadillac Police Department. "You don't want to create an atmosphere of panic; you just want them to use common sense and basic safety precautions and be aware of their surroundings."

Hawke said first and foremost, children should never get into a car with someone unknown to them.

"If someone attempts to offer a ride or is suspicious, you should report it immediately and not wait," Hawke said. "If you are in that situation, turn and run to any open business establishment. Don't get in the car."

Hawke said there have been a couple of reports around northern Michigan about similar incidents and Cadillac is certainly not immune to this type of situation.

"This type of incident is possible in any community and we just have to make sure the children know what to do. They should have a plan," he said.

If anyone sees a subject and vehicle fitting this description, police are asking them to call 911.

If anyone has information that might identify the suspect, they are asked to call the Cadillac Police Department at 775-3491 or the Silent Observer program to remain anonymous and receive a possible reward, if the tip leads to an arrest.

Former officer rejects plea deal

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

By Scott Hagen
shagen@citpat.com -- 768-4929

A former Albion police officer charged with taking pictures of a nude minor rejected a plea bargain and will instead take his chance in court -- a move that could put him behind bars for 20 years if found guilty.

Kyle Chaney, a former Officer of the Year and 14-year veteran at the Albion Department of Public Safety, faces four felony charges.

The alleged crimes involving a 16-year-old girl occurred during the past 15 months. Chaney was arrested Aug. 18 and fired from the Albion police force in mid-September following an internal investigation.

Chaney's attorney, Mark Webb, tentatively agreed to a plea bargain in early September.

The agreement had called for Chaney to plead guilty to two of the four charges against him and be sentenced to five years probation.

However, Chris Ann Johnson, assistant prosecutor for Kalamazoo County who is trying the case because of Chaney's involvement in Calhoun County, said she offered the plea at a pretrial hearing last week and was rejected. Webb could not be reached for comment.

Circuit Judge Stephen Miller will set a trial date soon.

If found guilty of the most serious count of child sexual abusive activity, Chaney, 39, could be sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Johnson said details of the case would emerge in trial and declined to comment on the specifics of the case.

"Not many facts came out on the record so far," she said. "So there's not much I can go into."

October 25, 2005

Unger trial still months away

Wife's body was found two years ago

By PATRICK SULLIVAN
Record-Eagle staff writer

BEULAH - Two years have passed since Mark Unger's wife's body was found in Lower Herring Lake, but his trial on murder charges is still months away.

A 13-day jury trial for Unger is scheduled to begin April 26 on a second-degree murder charge, but the case thus far has been marred by delays at every turn.

Prosecutors contend Unger caused his wife, Florence Unger, 37, to fall from a boathouse to a concrete slab 12 feet below. They contend he dragged her into the lake at a resort south of Elberta on Oct. 25, 2003.

Unger, 44, of Huntington Woods, maintains his innocence.

Prosecutors from the Michigan Attorney General's office took over the case from Benzie County Prosecutor Anthony Cicchelli.

Prosecutors say they still want to charge Unger with first-degree murder.

The preliminary hearing was delayed for more than a year as attorneys argued over whether Oakland County medical examiner Dr. L. J. Dragovic could testify that Florence Unger drowned.

District Court Judge Brent Danielson would not allow the evidence, but attorney general spokeswoman Allison Pierce said prosecutors will attempt to convince 19th Circuit Court Judge James Batzer that Dragovic should testify.

Prosecutors and Unger's defense attorneys, Robert Harrison and Thomas McGuire, are scheduled to argue over the medical examiner's testimony at a motion hearing scheduled for Dec. 9.

The autopsy listed a head injury as the cause of death, but Dragovic, who did not perform the autopsy but reviewed its results, testified that evidence suggests Florence Unger drowned.

The couple was going through a contentious divorce, but nonetheless spent a weekend at the resort with their children.

October 25,
2005

A Puzzling Trail to USC Baby Death

By Jia-Rui Chong and Rebecca Trounson, L. A. Times Staff Writers

BILLINGS, Mont. — A gifted, hard-working student, mature beyond her years. A talented athlete who played three sports in high school. A popular, high-spirited girl whose impersonations and rowdy singing cracked up friends.

Now, USC student Holly Ashcraft, 21, also is a young woman charged with murder, alleged to have left her newborn son in a trash container near her Los Angeles apartment. The baby's body was discovered just after midnight Oct. 10.

In Billings, a city of 100,000 where Ashcraft grew up in a tidy, white farmhouse set among sugar beet and grain fields, news of her arrest has gripped and shocked many. The local newspaper has run stories on her case, the details of her alleged crime printed next to a glossy yearbook photo of the clean-cut high school senior.

A popular Billings radio station urged listeners to call in with opinions. The callers, most of whom said they did not know her, said she should have given the baby up for adoption.

But for her friends, and even her parents, the case is not that simple.

Although Ashcraft excelled in academics and sports, she also got into trouble for partying toward the end of high school.

For much of her senior year, Ashcraft lived at a friend's home because of tensions with her mother, a junior high school and college teacher.

Her parents separated when she was about 15, and Ashcraft had not been in close contact with her father since.

"I love her," said her father, Terry Ashcraft, a metal tradesman, standing in the doorway of his modest house on the west side of Billings. "I'm puzzled. Other than that, I'll just leave it alone."

Several friends and former neighbors interviewed last week said they were having trouble reconciling the bright, outgoing young woman they know with the unsettling picture painted by authorities in Los Angeles.

Some friends said they worry that Ashcraft's tendency to be strong and independent — and, sometimes, to bottle up her feelings — may have contributed to a bad decision.

"She'd never ask for help for anything," said Candice Tesinsky, 20, who has known Ashcraft since grade school. Tesinsky's voice caught as she spoke of Ashcraft and her situation: "I think she probably went through a moment of shock."

Alina Stefek, 20, who was close to Ashcraft in elementary school and also hung out with her a bit in high school, said the news of the arrest seemed surreal. "I felt a lot of empathy for her. I wondered how she could feel so alone," Stefek said. "I think she has a very strong character, and

it surprised me that out of anyone it was Holly."

Stefek said she had last seen Ashcraft at a party in early 2004. Her friend said she was having a lot of fun at USC but also confided that she sometimes had trouble fitting in with students from wealthier backgrounds.

Ashcraft's mother, Marlene Zentz, who flew to Los Angeles after her daughter's arrest, also expressed support for her last week while acknowledging that they had clashed at times.

"I love her from the bottom of my heart," said Zentz, who agreed to be interviewed about Ashcraft's childhood but would speak only in limited terms about her current troubles. "She is a distinguished and wonderful girl, and I am very proud to be her parent."

Ashcraft grew up in a rural neighborhood of Billings, where most homes were set on farms of at least five acres. She and her older sister always seemed like pleasant, well-brought-up girls, neighbors said. The sisters played basketball outside their house and took cookies to an elderly woman who lived down the road.

Friends also said Ashcraft was friendly with a lot of guys in high school, but didn't date a lot. "She was independent," said Jacque Walen, who played basketball, softball and volleyball with her. "She went out and had fun."

During those years, Ashcraft's mother seemed strict and focused on her daughters' academic success, neighbors and friends said. Her husband worked as a pipe fitter and welder at the Exxon oil refinery but was hurt on the job and went on disability. The couple separated in 1998 and divorced in 2000, but appeared to remain on civil terms. Terry Ashcraft would stop by to work on the house or fix the car.

But about the beginning of her senior year, Ashcraft — along with her sister, some friends said — badly upset her mother by holding a large party at the house while Zentz was out of town. About 100 people showed up, drinking beer and liquor, friends recalled. The police eventually arrived too, Tesinsky said. Zentz said the party was a factor — but not the only one — in Ashcraft spending her senior year living with the family of her best friend, Kim Pogue.

But she characterized the strains between them as the often typical tensions between many mothers and soon-to-be-adult daughters, and said Ashcraft made the choice herself to live with the Pogues. Zentz said she agreed to the move because she knew her daughter would be well-cared for.

Zentz, who struggled at times to hold back tears as she spoke, said the two still saw one another that year on the Billings campus of Montana State University, where Ashcraft was taking many of her courses her senior year and where her mother was doing research.

Now, Zentz said, the Pogues are likely to join her and other family members in Los Angeles for any court proceedings. "We are all one big family for Holly now," said her mother, who now lives in Washington state.

To friends in Billings, Ashcraft seemed to be thriving at USC. She came back on school breaks saying she was having fun in the big city. Stefek recently joked with another friend about "how [Holly] was going to run some architecture firm some day."

Early on at the university, she lived in student housing but lived alone this year in a one-room apartment above the popular 29th Street Cafe. The baby's body was found in a trash bin near the building.

Deepening the mystery, law enforcement sources said Ashcraft, a third-year architecture student at USC, also was investigated — but not arrested or charged — in April 2004 after she arrived at a downtown Los Angeles hospital having just given birth but without a baby. She told authorities the child in that earlier case was stillborn and that she had disposed of the body on her own.

Many of her classmates expressed bewilderment at the accusations Ashcraft is facing.

Several people who had seen her in the last few months said that the normally slender, 5-foot-9 Ashcraft did not appear pregnant. But they also voiced ardent loyalty and a desire to protect her, urging classmates not to speak to reporters until more facts emerge.

"She is so genuine, so real," said one, who asked not to be identified. "Nobody wants to say anything that could hurt her. There is potential punishment at the end of this."

Ashcraft remains in custody at the Twin Towers jail in downtown Los Angeles, where she is being held in lieu of \$2-million bail. She is scheduled to be arraigned Nov. 9.

Her attorney, Paul J. Wallin, takes issue with early police media statements that the child was full-term, saying that a police report actually characterizes the infant as of only 30 to 32 weeks gestation.

Police confirmed Monday that the child was not full-term but they and the district attorney's office emphasized a preliminary coroner's report saying the infant was born alive.

Wallin said Ashcraft, who is housed alone, has twice called her mother, crying, from the jail. "Common sense would dictate that a 21-year-old like this doesn't belong in there," the attorney said. "She needs to be with her mother, with people who can help her."

Chong reported from Billings and Trounson from Los Angeles. Times staff writers Nancy Wride, Richard Winton and Jonathan Abrams also contributed to this report.

City residents concerned about kids

Web-posted Oct 25, 2005

DIANA DILLABER MURRAY
Of The Oakland Press

If there is one thing that struck a chord among residents at a town hall meeting in Pontiac on Monday night, it was concern for the city's children.

Many of those who spoke out in the audience of more than 100 focused on concerns about how children are going to turn out. They pointed to problems in the schools, lack of positive activities for children and concern about how children are being raised.

The town hall meeting, at Pontiac City Hall, was sponsored by the Greater Pontiac Community Coalition.

Several people said children arrive at school hungry and carry with them the burden of problems at home. Others said students from Pontiac who go to other area school districts are more apt to follow the rules there, but not at their home high schools.

"I've never seen it as bad as it is today," said Stanley Jones, 87, a Pontiac Motors retiree.

"I'm concerned about the kids. We've got to give our kids a good foundation," said Stanley, the father of seven, who was critical of taking God, spankings and prayers out of school.

One mother, who is active in her child's school, said Pontiac children do not have the activities other districts' young people have.

"They get into other things because they don't have enough to do," said the mother, who was one of two who said they were thinking of taking their children out of the district.

Another major concern was what people see as the lack of accountability of elected officials in the schools and city government.

A school social worker who has been in schools around the county said she has noticed "for some reason, people here don't hold people accountable."

John Paul Torres, a circuit court clerk, said his father pushed him to vote and he "realized if I wanted something done I would vote and if the elected officials don't do what they said they would ... don't vote for them again."

The town hall meeting gave people a chance to voice their concerns about the city and to encourage involvement in the government process on the part of residents. Voter apathy, city financial issues, reviving downtown and the community and Pontiac schools were topics.

Oakland Press Executive Editor Garry Gilbert was the moderator, and the Rev. Douglas Jones, president of the coalition, hosted the event. Both Mayor Willie Payne and state Rep. Clarence Phillips, who is challenging Payne for the office Nov. 8, were at the meeting.

"I know these are complex issues, and there are no easy answers," Gilbert said, when he opened the discussion, urging the audience to "focus on fixing the problem, not fixing the blame."

More than once Jones and others in the audience urged people to use their votes as the power to make changes.

There was little reference to the city's \$34 million deficit at the town hall meeting, which ironically was being held at the same time council members were hearing a report on the city's financial status from state auditors in an adjacent room.

The closest any speaker came to the topic of the city's financial crisis was to point out that the closing of community centers is taking away many of the activities provided for youths.

"I am questioning why churches aren't involved more. ... Get these centers opened up," said resident Sam Brady. "Why doesn't this administration go to GM and get the centers opened," he added, noting the city has given the automaker several tax breaks.

And even when the topic of voter apathy came up < only 7,000 people voted in a city of 68,000 < the discussion circled back to the fact that the city's youngest voters are not going to the polls. Several people pointed again to the schools and said the city's youth needed to be educated about voting. Others urged that when they reached the age of 18 they should be encouraged to vote by their families and community.

"Most people who are grandmothers and grandfathers go to vote because they came through an era when it was difficult to vote," said County Commissioner Mattie McKinny Hatchett. "But they are leaving voting-age people up in bed while they go out and vote."

"Voting needs to be a family affair, and every member of the family needs to be responsible for the other people in the family to vote," said Hatchett, who also recommended a program that would follow up on all 18-year-olds who register to ensure they vote.

Council candidate Kermit Williams said: "A lot of young people are embarrassed because they don't know how to vote. They should be taught in school in activities yearround."

Another issue that brought speakers to the microphone was revitalizing downtown.

Business people in the audience said the city needs to help those who want to start a business, not discourage them.

Friday, October 21, 2005

Man charged with threatening Oakland judge Political action committee leader told the judge to step down or he would expose alleged extramarital affair.

By Mike Martindale / The Detroit News

A man was charged Thursday with threatening to expose what he said was an Oakland Circuit Court judge's extramarital affair unless she stepped down from the bench.

Randall Blair, 38, was charged with extortion, a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. He was accused of sending unsolicited e-mail messages to Judge Cheryl A. Matthews in August and giving her a 48-hour deadline to resign or risk having an alleged extramarital affair made public.

Bloomfield Township 48th District Court Magistrate Kathleen Trott entered a not guilty plea for Blair and ordered him held on \$10,000 bond pending a Nov. 2 preliminary exam.

When contacted, Matthews, 41, referred all questions about the incident to assistant Oakland County prosecuting attorney John Skrzynski.

"To my knowledge they (Matthews and Blair) don't know each other and he has never been before her in court as a judge or an assistant prosecutor," said Skrzynski, who appeared before Trott on Thursday to seek conditions on bond for Blair.

"It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but this is serious and can't be tolerated," Skrzynski said.

"What has occurred is the same as blackmail -- whether or not the person can accomplish what they set out to do. Our (legal) system cannot function if the people at the top have to fear going to work or doing their jobs."

Blair is president and co-founder of a political action committee called Michigan Victims of CPS (Child Protective Services). Its members advocate change and form within the CPS and want to hold attorneys and judges accountable for actions that they believe are objectionable.

The group has targeted and published names of others they consider "enemies of children."

"This has nothing to do with free speech or politics -- you can say whatever you want as long as you don't break the law, but not making threats like this," Skrzynski said.

Matthews, former head of the Oakland County Prosecutor's Child Sexual Assault Unit, was elected to the bench last November and sworn in as a judge in January.

Skrzynski noted how Blair, on Internet sites and fliers, listed Matthews' name and her husband and children's names and their address. That information prompted an invasion of a privacy lawsuit against Blair by Jeffrey S. Sherbow, an attorney who bought the Matthews' former home last year and was "shocked" in July when he saw a flier that called him an "enemy of children."

You can reach Mike Martindale at (248) 647-7226 or mmartindale@detnews.com.

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

Fund-raiser helps abused kids

By Chuck Bennett / Special to The Detroit News

Chip St. Clair of Birmingham stood in front of a little more than 200 people in the Townsend Hotel ballroom and told in detail horrifying stories of how he was severely abused by his father while growing up in Oakland County.

His emotional testimony was a reminder of why guests were there on Oct. 14, when the Greater Detroit Auxiliary of Childhelp USA presented its sixth annual Celebrate the Child fund-raising gala. Guests paid \$225 each for an evening that included passed hors d'oeuvres during the cocktail hour, a sit-down filet mignon dinner, a live auction, dancing and other entertainment. Because of the countless situations like St. Clair's, Childhelp USA was developed in 1959 by Sara O'Meara and Yvonne Feddersen. Its purpose is to provide help and hope to the thousands of children and adults who have been traumatized by child abuse.

"When Elizabeth Brazilian of Childhelp first told me about the organization, after I stopped crying, I vowed to help out in any way I could," says Jennifer Gilbert, who hosted a special patrons party in conjunction with this event at her palatial Franklin home. "It is one of those things that you hear about and can't help but get involved."

Event chairs were Keith Pomeroy, Susan Sosnick, Phyllis Whitehead and Jim Wolfe.

Ex-worker sues Wayne County over firing

Retaliation by superiors is alleged

October 25, 2005

BY ZACHARY GORCHOW
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A former Wayne County employee filed a whistle-blower lawsuit against the county Monday, claiming he was fired for reporting wrongdoing to his superiors.

Dan Mercier was the county's director of quality assurance at the Department of Children and Family Services when, according to the lawsuit he filed in U.S. District Court in Detroit, he found evidence that the Juvenile Assessment Center had billed the county for work with juveniles who did not exist and overbilled for work with ones who did.

The center is a private, nonprofit organization that the county pays to assess troubled juveniles for psychological, psychiatric and substance abuse problems and make recommendations on treatment.

In the lawsuit, Mercier claimed he reported the evidence to Nancy Mouradian, chief of staff to Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano this summer, and the county fired him a short time later. County spokeswoman Sharon Banks said Mercier lost his job when the county laid off several employees to address a tight budget situation.

"These are the allegations of a disgruntled employee," she said.

A phone call requesting comment from the Juvenile Assessment Center was not returned. The lawsuit is related to one also filed this month by Philip Abraham, the county's former director of technology, who alleged the county fired him after he uncovered evidence of illegalities in juvenile services.

Also, on Thursday, the County Commission voted to pay a \$130,000 settlement to Marlene (Willow) Hagans. She had filed a suit claiming she was demoted after writing letters to the inspectors general of several federal agencies alleging corruption and misuse of public money by county officials.

Contact ZACHARY GORCHOW at 313-223-4536 or zgorchow@freepress.com.

High school shooting spurs gunfire in city

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

LaNIA COLEMAN
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Gunmen bent on revenge opened fire Tuesday on the half-brother of the 15-year-old charged with attempted murder in last week's Saginaw High School shooting, their mother says. Walking near Holland and Fenton, where his mother lives, Devario Barrerra, 17, got on his hands and knees, crawling as bullets flew over his head, said Ann Jamrog, the mother of Clarence W. Russell III, who is jailed without bond.

"They were really trying to kill him yesterday," said Jamrog, 34, said of Barrerra. "They were crawling and they were still shooting. About 20 times they shot at them. He's just really scared." Bullets found Barrerra's two companions as the three crossed a vacant lot about 6:30 p.m. A 15-year-old Saginaw High student suffered a gunshot to his knee, an 18-year-old to his foot, police said.

They stumbled to a nearby home for safety. The shooters apparently were firing from a car, Saginaw police said.

"It's because of what happened at Saginaw High," Jamrog added of the Thursday near-fatal shooting of 15-year-old Daniel Foster. "From what I hear, they're trying to keep us quiet." Jamrog said people who she believed were the same gunmen riddled her East Holland house with bullets about 8 p.m. Sunday. One came through a window and lodged in a closet, she said. "Three guys got out of their car and started shooting at the house," she said. "We hit the ground." Jamrog has repeatedly said she believes gang members from the city's South Side -- the same ones she claims forced her son to use "self-defense" in the shooting of Foster -- are behind the attacks.

However, Saginaw Police Detective Sgt. Mark Lively said the victims, including Barrerra, denied in statements to detectives that the Monday shooting was a reprisal for Foster.

Meanwhile, more violence likely will occur and the culprits ultimately will up the ante, said an 18-year-old neighborhood resident who would identify himself only as Tra.

"These people need to get their lives right," he said, sucking on a cigar and shivering in a cold, misty rain that cast a dreary haze in the glow of street lights. "It's just a matter of time before someone gets killed."

He was nearly prophetic.

Two hours later, the drama continued when a family member of one of the victims ran into a hospital emergency room and asked a nurse to lock the doors because someone was en route to "finish the job," authorities said.

"It's not safe to be anywhere but in the house," said Tra, who added he wishes he lived in a community where he didn't have to duck bullets. He said the fear of deadly violence erupting from gang and personal rivalries caused him to drop out of school.

"I can't go to Saginaw High," he said. "Just like they were picking with (Foster), they'd probably pick with me."

Thursday's school shooting occurred about noon when police said Russell fired a stolen .380-caliber handgun at close range into Foster's chest. The bullet entered near Foster's heart and exited near his kidney.

Both Russell and Foster are sophomores.

Russell, who turns 16 on Thursday, is facing an attempted murder charge as an adult, a charge carrying up to life in prison.

LaNia Coleman covers law enforcement for The Saginaw News. You may reach her at 776-9690.

Oct 25, 11:18 AM EDT

Senator wants to bar sentencing juveniles to life without parole

By DAVID EGGERT
Associated Press Writer

LANSING, Mich. (AP) -- A state senator on Tuesday introduced legislation to bar Michigan juveniles from being sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Noting a study showing Michigan is the second-most aggressive state in imposing life-without-parole sentences on juveniles, Sen. Liz Brater announced a four-bill package she said would give children who commit violent crimes a second chance at life.

"These children have committed horrible crimes, and must be held accountable for their actions," the Ann Arbor Democrat said. "No one is saying these individuals should get off with just a slap on the wrist, but locking them away forever ignores the fact that there is a chance they could eventually become productive members of society."

According to a report issued by the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan, 306 prisoners in the state are serving life sentences without a chance of parole for crimes committed before the age of 18. Almost half of them, or 146, committed their crimes before age 16.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International released a study earlier this month showing that at least 2,225 juvenile offenders are serving life sentences without chance of parole in the United States, compared to a total of 12 elsewhere in the world. Michigan had the second-highest rate of giving youths life sentences without a chance of parole.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has said she is open to considering changes in the current law.

On the Net:

Sen. Liz Brater: <http://www.senate.mi.gov/brater/>

A copy of the nationwide report can be found at the following sites:

<http://hrw.org/reports/2005/us1005/>

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/usa/clwop/>

© 2005 The Associated Press

Seniors warned of scams

October 25, 2005

By Don Reid/Coldwater Daily Reporter Staff Writer

COLDWATER — “We are not here to scare you. We are here to inform you,” Jay Johnson of Southern Michigan Bank and Trust told a packed meeting room at the H and C Burnside Senior Center on Monday morning.

It was a meeting of the Triad, a group set up to help seniors avoid fraud and scams.

Jim Hurley, a trooper with the Coldwater post of the Michigan State Police, said if there were offers or financial deals that were hard to understand or questionable, “there are people to ask.”

Published October 25, 2005

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Tuesday's letters to the editor

Beware 'friend'

In regard to the article about the Friend of the Court amnesty program.

Is there anyone who deals with FOC who believes they collect anything? FOC ruins your credit, attaches liens to your house, takes away your driver's license and somehow you are supposed to come up with thousands of dollars?

FOC knows its system is badly flawed and really ineffective. FOC uses formulas that it knows unfairly represent a person's income so as to assign an amount for support that is based on tainted facts. These attempts to appear to show "compassion" or to "give people a chance to make right" are laughable!

FOC only has the interest of the state of Michigan in mind; if a child or two gets help, it makes for great press.

Howard Smith
Lansing

State, agencies seek to relieve heating-bill fears

New programs designed to help customers offset winter's chill

By ANGELA MULLINS
Times Herald

Mary Hernandez of Port Huron is concerned about the numbers that soon may show up on the heating bills of both her household and that of her 79-year-old mother.

Although Hernandez's steepest bill last winter was slightly less than \$100, she's preparing for much worse this year. "I'm not sure what's going to happen," Hernandez said. "I'll have to wait until the first month's bill and then take it from there."

With the cost of heating bills in Michigan expected to jump about 46% from last year, several government officials and consumer groups have taken action to bring relief as money in utility assistance funds continues to sag.

Now, Michigan Democrats are proposing a broad package of legislation aimed at everything from promoting energy efficiency to increasing home-heating credits.

For their part, state utility regulators are extending the number of days on energy bill due dates and setting parameters on service shut-offs.

WHERE TO TURN GETTING HELP

For details about enrolling in an energy-education class or to learn about home-weatherization programs and those that help pay utility bills, call the Economic Opportunity Committee of St. Clair County at (810) 982-8541.

To find out about SEMCO's payment-assistance and Flex Budget programs, visit semcoenergy.com. Click on SEMCO Energy Gas Co., then click on "Payment Assistance Plans" or "Flex Budget Program." The Flex Budget Program allows customers to make equal monthly payments throughout the year. Customers on this program also may see an increase in their monthly bills because of the high natural-gas prices. Information about these programs also can be obtained by calling (800) 624-2019.

HOW TO DONATE HELPING OTHERS

Donations to be distributed for heating-bill assistance can be mailed to the United Way of St. Clair County, 1723 Military St., Port Huron, 48060. For details, call (810) 985-8169.

AT A GLANCE CUT THE COST

PROPOSED HEATING LEGISLATION

Would prohibit natural-gas utilities from shutting off service for nonpayment of bills between Dec. 1 and March 31 for some people, including those with incomes less than 200% - or \$38,700 for a family of four - of the federal poverty level and seniors.

Would allow for individuals with incomes up to 300% - or \$58,050 for a family of four - of the federal poverty level to deduct half of their expenses up to \$5,000 for home weatherization.

Would provide a one-time emergency increase of income threshold for the Home Heating Credit from 110% to 125% of the federal poverty level and would subsidize federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Average assistance levels would increase from \$210 to \$250 annually.

Would give the Michigan Public Service Commission the authority to declare an energy emergency in which grant funds for energy efficiency, about \$5 million annually, could be used only for the immediate energy crisis.

Would create the "Keep Our Families Warm" fund to be funded through a voluntary check-off box on state income tax forms.

Would create a database to allow individuals and companies to donate time, services and materials to assist in weatherization and energy-efficiency projects in homes of low-income families.

Would press Congress to appropriate \$3.4 billion to states, compared to the current \$1.8 billion, for the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program block grant.

Would create an emergency energy summit so interested parties could develop a long-term energy plan. plan can be set up. Call (800) 624-2019.

But for many, the ultimate question remains - will it be enough when this winter's coldest months roll around?

What's been done

The Michigan Public Service Commission last week approved new guidelines meant to assist consumers. The rules, which take effect Nov. 1 and continue for six months, include: Making the due date for gas and electric bills no sooner than 22 days after the bills have been sent.

Limiting to \$50 the amount of utility debt costumers can be ordered to pay.

If paying a monthly amount equal to 6% of their annual estimated bill, service shut-off is prohibited for seniors 65 and older and households where income levels don't exceed 200% - or \$38,700 for a family of four - of the federal poverty level.

Also, the commission has launched a "BeWinterWise" campaign to inform people about how to get help and cut costs and has granted \$41 million to agencies statewide for heating-bill relief.

It's all a step in the right direction, several people said, but isn't enough to calm all fears.

Those who are the most worried are families, or individuals, who said they don't qualify for assistance programs or leniency.

Jillian Loope, 25, of Kimball Township considers herself a member of the working middle class. If she and her son ever fell into a rough spot, getting help could be hard.

"A lot of times people are working really hard and make just above the limit," Loope said. "It'd be nice if there was something out there for everyone."

Legislating help

State Rep. John Espinoza, D-Croswell, said laws proposed by his party are aimed at helping not just the poorest of the poor but a larger percentage of the state's population.

The package of bills, which was announced last week, would not only help more people get through the upcoming winter but would be effective for years to come, he said.

Called Winter Assistance and Relief for Michigan, or WARM, the proposal includes allowing families with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty level to deduct home-weatherization costs and creating an emergency energy summit for discussion of long-term energy plans.

The goal of WARM, Democrats said, is to address high energy costs, to make sure no state resident goes without heat and to encourage people to save energy.

"A lot of the programs that assist are aimed at helping some of the very low-income families.

The middle class ... the people that are keeping our economy alive also need a break," Espinoza said. "The legislature needs to take steps to not have anyone fall through the cracks."

The legislation is expected to be introduced in the House soon.

Still hurting

While various entities rush to make help available as quickly as possible, one of the most popular local relief programs is continuing to struggle.

The United Way of St. Clair County has no money to help area residents with their utility bills and doesn't expect any money to be available any time soon.

The agency gives money to the Economic Opportunity Committee of St. Clair County for distribution.

In the meantime, Lonnie Stevens, executive director of the local United Way, said people need to continue to do what they can to cut costs.

"The government assistance just cannot possibly be as high as it has been in the past," Stevens said. "We all need to take personal responsibility. We need to be sure that people know they need to conserve. "

Contact Angela Mullins at (810) 989-6270 or amullins@gannett.com.

Originally published October 25, 2005

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Agency plans help to upgrade residents' homes

Macomb County residents who are looking to reduce their heating bills by increasing their home's energy efficiency may be able to get help from the Macomb County Community Services Agency (MCCSA).

MCCSA's home preservation/energy division offers free weatherization assistance to Macomb County residents meeting income eligibility requirements. Rental property owners and renters also may be eligible for the program, although landlords must share some of the costs.

Crews will use energy audits and diagnostic tests to determine the most cost-effective measures for reducing energy costs in each home before performing the work. The measures can include the installation of insulation, caulking or weather-stripping and furnace repair or replacement.

On average, a homeowner can save \$300 annually through weatherization.

Macomb County residents interested in applying should contact their local Community Action Center for more information between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Residents in communities north of 23 Mile can call 586-749-5146. Residents living between 14 Mile and 23 Mile, as well as in St. Clair Shores, can call 586-469-6964. All other residents in the county can call 586-759-9150.

By Nate Trela

Readers looking for ways out of energy crunch

BY KRISTINA HUGHES NEWS-REVIEW STAFF WRITER

Monday, October 24, 2005 3:01 PM EDT

As energy costs sky rocket, some Northern Michigan residents respond by purchasing energy efficient heat systems, insulating rooms and purchasing new windows.

According to a recent Associated Press report, natural gas users will see their monthly bills go up approximately 46 percent. "Over the 2005-2006 heating year, the average natural gas user in Michigan is expected to pay nearly \$1,300 for heat, up 38 percent from \$944 in 2004-05."

Because of the projected costs, some News-Review reader panelists are making plans to be more energy efficient. Panelists have agreed to comment on questions throughout the year.

Jonathan Scheel of Bear Creek Township purchased a new high efficiency furnace two weeks ago, after installing more insulation in his home.

"I had high energy costs last year," Scheel, 48, said. "I have procrastinated before, but because of the costs the project had to be done."

Scheel, a project manager, said the 20-year-old furnace was efficient for its time, but left his home cold.

After putting plastic covers over the windows and insulating her basement windows, Gail Gerrie of Walloon Lake, will keep her eye on the thermostat.

"My house is never super hot in the winter. I'm very frugal, my dad raised me that way. We always watched the thermostat," said Gerrie, 43, a marketing and promotions professional. "My kids kind of groan about it."

Gerrie, who plans to pinch pennies, said the recent news is playing off people's fears.

"My single friends are very scared, it's going to be groceries or gas," she said. But Gerrie realize she's dependent on natural gas.

"What are we supposed to do, freeze or pray for a Hawaiian winter?" Gerrie said.

Teresa Betts-Cobau, like any consumer of natural gas, is worried about the possibility of paying double to keep her home comfortable. She purchased new patio doors, and will set her automatic thermostat to save costs.

Betts-Cobau, 54, a nurse practitioner from Harbor Springs, wonders what is causing her to pay more, and is interested in the political root of the gas prices.

“We have to look at why are gas prices up in the first place. I don't think it's necessarily just the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it also involves our interest in the Middle East,” Betts-Cobau said. “It would behoove us to have a lot more lobbying regarding alternative fuels.”

But some residents are going back to the days of heating with wood.

Judith Willey, 67, a retiree of Charlevoix, will use a heating system predating electric and natural gas.

“We plan to use our wood burning stove a lot more this winter,” Willey said.

Willey said she is more conscious of the costs and will offset her gas bill by using the wood burner.

“I think anyone, at least with a brain, will try to do something to conserve power,” Willey said.

Ronald Svatora, 69, a retiree from Petoskey, heated his home with a wood furnace for years. In his new home, he's made several provisions to be energy efficient.

Svatora's new home features highly insulated rooms and basement, and a high efficiency gas furnace and water heater.

“We have taken every step we can to keep our energy down,” Svatora said.

Svatora plans to set the thermostat between 62 to 68, but “You can only go so far. I refuse to drop the temperature to 55 degrees.”

Svatora said the high costs do not seem to bother people with a high income, but those on a fixed income are very worried.

“I don't know what else I can do but pay the piper,” Svatora said.

Kristina Hughes can be reached at 439-9348, or khuges@petoskeynews.com.

Slaying charges include death of fetus

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

A former Honduran refugee who testified before Congress three years ago about the struggles of young immigrants was charged Monday with killing a pregnant woman and her unborn child. The charge in the death of the fetus -- a girl who was named Luz Maria by her father -- is the first filed in Kent County under the state's Prenatal Protection Act, a law inspired by a Grand Rapids case.

Few such cases have been filed in the state.

Each charge could lead to life in prison for Edwin Lario Munoz, 19, who gained national attention in 2002 with stories about his plight as an immigrant that appeared in newspapers and in Parade Magazine. He said he was abused for months while jailed in California after illegally crossing the United States border from Mexico.

Grand Rapids police obtained warrants Monday charging Lario Munoz with felony murder in the Oct. 14 strangulation of Silvia Sanchez-Parada, 27, at a home at 848 Baxter St. SE. They also charged him with assault on a pregnant person with intent to cause miscarriage or stillbirth. He already faced a charge of attempted murder for allegedly attacking Sanchez-Parada's husband, Leoncio Garcia-Lopez, with a knife and meat fork after the husband discovered her body. Police said they might drop the attempted murder charge.

The victim's family is Catholic and believes that the death of a fetus should be treated like murder, said family friend Maria Barriga.

"He killed a baby, whether it was inside the mother or outside the mother," Barriga said. "It's almost like aborting a baby without the mother's permission.

"They didn't lose one person; they lost two people."

The baby was due to be born in January.

Kent County Prosecutor William Forsyth said it is the first time his office has filed charges in a prenatal death.

"The statute is meant to address this type of situation," Forsyth said. "I don't anticipate any unusual problems. We have to prove certain elements, and, in my opinion, they have been met." The charge is similar to second-degree murder, in which prosecutors don't necessarily have to prove he intended to kill the fetus, only that he should have known his actions could lead to death, Forsyth said.

Under the Prenatal Protection Act, in effect since Jan. 1, 1999, anyone who injures or kills a fetus, except for the mother or a doctor performing an abortion at a mother's request, can face severe criminal and civil penalties -- regardless of the fetus' stage of development.

Michigan was the 28th state in the nation to pass such a law, which was inspired by the death of a Grand Rapids woman and her unborn child in a 1995 car crash.

Last month, a Macomb County teen was sentenced to probation under the law after pleading no contest to repeatedly assaulting his girlfriend, with her consent, with a miniature baseball bat to terminate her pregnancy. The girlfriend was not charged. The fetus was buried on a farm and discovered by detectives.

In the most recent case, the victim's husband, Leoncio Garcia-Lopez, 43, said he was greeted by the suspect, who lived in an upstairs room, when he arrived home from work on Oct. 14. He discovered his wife's body on the kitchen floor with a wash cloth draped over her face. He and the suspect then struggled over a knife and a meat fork, he said.

The husband suffered numerous stab and puncture wounds before escaping with his 10-month-old son, Jonathan.

The suspect, who also suffered stab wounds, fled the house and claimed that the husband had strangled the victim before attacking him. But an autopsy showed the woman was dead before the husband returned home to discover her body, police said.

The bodies of the mother and the unborn child were shipped on Saturday to her family in southern Mexico thanks to donations by family, friends and strangers, Barriga said.

Sunday, October 23, 2005

'Oops' babies are breaking state budget

By Nolan Finley / The Detroit News

Ignorance breeds faster than intelligence. That fact of life is busting Michigan's budget. More than 40,000 babies are born each year on the state's Medicaid system, or about 40 percent of all births. Of those, 26,000 are "oops" babies, unintended pregnancies paid for by state taxpayers.

The price tag just for those mistakes is \$286 million a year, or about \$11,000 per baby for prenatal care, delivery and post-natal checkups.

Most will go on the welfare rolls after birth, becoming an escalating expense for taxpayers and explaining why welfare eats up a third of the state's General Fund and growing.

Most are also born to single mothers, vastly increasing the odds that they'll be raised in poverty. And most aren't an only child - they have brothers and sisters, often several, whose upkeep also goes on the public tab.

Taxpayers stuck

It's no wonder Michigan can't fully fund its public schools, doesn't have the money to support its universities properly and can't cut taxes to forge a job-creating business climate. State taxpayers are working themselves to death to pay for the reckless behavior of their fellow citizens.

The most tempting answer is to tell people not to have babies they can't afford and, if they do, figure out how to support them themselves.

But we are slaves to our compassion, and that won't allow us to make children suffer the consequences of their parents' irresponsibility.

Demanding contraceptive use as a condition of receiving aid is an idea with appeal, but one that fails the tests of privacy and religious freedom.

So we accept that everyone has the right to have as many babies as they want, and taxpayers have the right to pay for them.

Give them the facts

For answers, we're left with education and making sure contraceptives are readily available.

Believe it or not, Marianne Udow, director of the Department of Human Services, says many people don't understand how contraceptives work or don't have access to them.

And many of those who are getting pregnant are little more than children themselves.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has started a pilot program in 15 school districts to teach parents how to talk to their children about sexual responsibility and has asked for a federal waiver to provide family planning services to low-income residents.

Critics say this pushes state government too deeply into matters best handled in the home.

Normally, I'd be on their side.

But Medicaid costs Michigan \$2 billion and is adding 100,000 new clients a year. One Michigan resident receives public assistance for every six who pay taxes.

At this pace, the ratio soon will be one-to-one, and every taxpayer will have his or her own welfare recipient to support.

Raising my own kids took a big bite out of my wallet. I'd rather not pay to rear someone else's.

If we can cut the dependency bill by making people smarter about where babies come from, then let's do it.

Nolan Finley is The News' editorial page editor. Reach him at nfinley@detnews.com or (313) 222-2064. Watch Nolan Finley at 8:30 p.m. Fridays on "Am I Right?" on Detroit Public Television, Ch. 56

A Breakthrough on Homelessness?

Governing

October 25, 2005

I'm headed off to San Francisco tomorrow to see how Mayor Gavin Newsom is handling his city's notorious homeless problem.

San Francisco, like a lot of cities, recently passed a "10 Year Plan" to End Homelessness. I must confess that about a year ago, when I first started hearing that cities everywhere were passing such plans, my response was pretty cynical. It sounded like a feel-good repackaging of ideas about a problem that only seems to grow more and more intractable. Ten years, I thought: just long enough that most mayors won't be in office long enough to see it fail.

Then I spoke to Philip Mangano, President Bush's homeless czar. Mangano is the force behind these 10 Year Plans, which he relentlessly criss-crosses the country promoting. To my surprise, many big-city mayors, who are mostly Democrats (like Newsom) and have few good things to say about the Bush administration (like Newsom) have really embraced Mangano and his message. After talking to Mangano on Friday, I can see why. He is so passionate about trying to end chronic homelessness that he burned through the batteries on two cell phones talking to me about it.

Mangano, a longtime homeless advocate from Boston, offers something of a third way on homeless policy. He seems to want to turn the conversation away from left- and right-wing ideologies and instead toward research and data. His main focus is the "chronic" homeless--the people, many with mental illness and substance abuse problems, who are most visible on the street. He cites studies that have shown their hidden costs to government: anywhere from \$40,000 a year to well over \$100,000 a year per homeless person, if you count all the hospital visits, police contacts and jail time. "Homelessness policy has been driven by anecdote, feeling, word of mouth and conjecture," Mangano says. "We're trying to put an end to that."

Mangano's preferred solution is a strategy called "housing first." It envisions that cities will spend less on temporary shelters, which Mangano argues are not good places for people with serious problems to get back on their feet. And it calls for putting more funding into apartments that people can move into from off the street, where they receive counseling and treatment in a more controlled setting. Studies of housing first pilots in New York and San Francisco have shown success rates of about 85 percent of participants staying housed.

Some liberals won't like Mangano's stance because he's mostly shuffling money and priorities, and doesn't have extra dollars to pump into affordable housing. And some conservatives who in the past have argued that homelessness is more a problem of substance abuse and mental illness than one of housing won't like it because Mangano argues that "housing itself has a therapeutic impact." Still other critics say that Mangano is pitting the needs of the single adult homeless against the families with children who turn up in shelters in disturbingly large numbers.

San Francisco, for better or worse, is shaping its policies very much in Mangano's mold. Mayor Newsom boasts that the number of homeless in San Francisco is down by 37 percent in two years. If that's true, it would be a remarkable feat.

Let's just say my cynicism is melting, if not my journalistic skepticism. It'll be good to see how this stuff works on the ground. I'll let you know what I find out.

Poverty level to guide Macomb County wages

October 25, 2005

BY JOHN MASSON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Genafer Hintz has a college degree, \$40,000 in student loan debt and three part-time jobs. Someday, she says, she hopes to cut that back to one job that pays what she would consider a living wage.

So it's not surprising she took great exception Monday when Lillian Adams, executive director of the Sterling Heights, Utica and Shelby Township Chamber of Commerce, told Macomb County lawmakers, "There's employees who aren't worth any more than \$5 an hour."

"I'm worth more than that," Hintz said to the applause of an audience full of labor advocates. "I can't find a job that pays a living wage."

Even though Hintz -- who doesn't work for Macomb County -- wouldn't be helped by the proposal under consideration by county commissioners, she was one of many activists on hand Monday when the Personnel Committee took testimony. The issue was whether to require companies contracting with the county to pay a wage based upon the federal poverty level. In the end, the committee voted 18-8 -- almost purely along party lines, with Democrats in the majority -- to require the wage for things like group home services and other work. The full board's approval is expected when it meets Wednesday.

According to Commissioners Paul Gielegghem and Jon Switalski, the two Democrats who drafted the policy, companies will be required to pay workers at least 100% of the federal poverty level for a family of three if they also provide health care coverage, or 125% of the federal poverty level if they choose not to pay for health insurance.

Gielegghem said pre-tax wages of \$9.58 per hour put workers at that federal poverty level, while wages of \$12.09 an hour put workers at 125% of the level.

He added that other municipalities, including Wayne County, which have taken similar steps have seen increases of about 1% in the costs of their operations. He said he expected that amount to be about the same in Macomb County, although he couldn't provide a dollar estimate. That 1% increase would translate to between \$1,300 and \$4,400 per year for affected workers, he added.

"We all talk about switching from welfare to workfare," Gielegghem said. "Well, people who are working shouldn't have to live in poverty. This rewards work, rewards people who are playing by the rules and working hard to take care of their families."

But Republican Commissioner Peter Lund joined others in arguing that the committee didn't have enough information, including solid numbers, to make a decision.

"First, we don't know the full effect of it," Lund said. "Nobody could tell us how much it would cost. ... And it's getting to the point with our county where we're running out of money."

Lund said he's worried that the policy will send a message that the county is unfriendly to business.

"We ran a deficit last year of \$3 million; this year it's in the \$8- to \$10-million range, we've got deficits as far as the eye can see," Lund said. "And when you take action, and you have no idea what the cost is, that's fiscal irresponsibility."

Others, including representatives of Macomb County chambers of commerce, argued that while the policy is well-intentioned, it's too complicated and too uncertain. They also fear that companies won't submit bids to the county if they have to comply with the increased burden. Switalski sees the policy more as a form of social responsibility.

"There's a human, social value to paying people a wage that gives them some dignity," he said. "I don't believe that it's a social handout. I believe that it's a just wage."

Contact JOHN MASSON at 586-469-4904 or masson@freepress.com.

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

Macomb approves living wage to help the working poor

Officials vote 18-8 to set hourly pay for full-time county workers; chambers of commerce fear impact.

By Jim Lynch / The Detroit News

MOUNT CLEMENS -- Macomb County commissioners on Monday approved a living wage policy designed to ensure county employees and those contracting with the county earn pay "sufficient to meet basic subsistence needs."

The vote came on the heels of new statistics that show nearly 21 percent of the county's residents are among the working poor -- those with jobs who still require financial assistance to get by. The new policy sets hourly wages at \$9.58 for employees who are receiving health benefits and \$12.09 for those who do not. It goes into effect Jan. 1, 2006.

The living wage was intended to address that growing problem, but it did not pass without controversy. Some commissioners said they were concerned not enough research had been done on the potential impact on government and local businesses.

Approved by an 18-8 vote, the policy guarantees county workers and contractor employees wages that are at least 125 percent of the federal poverty level, or 100 percent if the job includes benefits. It should mean little in the way of direct cost increases to the county since all of its full-time personnel are already paid at or above the new level.

The move was welcome news for 33-year-old Mount Clemens resident Genafer Hintz, who said she must work three jobs without health insurance to make ends meet.

"And I know I'm not alone," she said.

But part-time workers are not covered by the policy, meaning Hintz would not be helped even if her jobs were with Macomb County.

Detroit, Lansing and Warren as well as Ingham County have living wage policies. A crowd of 60 turned out for Monday's meeting, including representatives from local union chapters. Many of them cheered once the measure had been approved.

Nancy Falcone-Sullivan, chairwoman of the Macomb Community College board of trustees and a labor representative for the United Auto Workers, said a living wage policy "would promote employment, not unemployment."

Others, particularly members of area chambers of commerce, see the potential impact differently. "If the county wants to pay its employees more, it should do so," said Grace Shore, president of the Central Macomb Chamber of Commerce. "But to mandate wages ... is inappropriate."

Lil Adams was even more blunt.

"There are employees who aren't worth more than \$5 an hour," said Adams, executive director of the Sterling Heights Area Chamber of Commerce.

You can reach Jim Lynch at (586) 468-0520 or jlynch@detnews.com.